THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
For the Love of Christmas
December 19, 1999
John M. Buchanan

We light this candle as a sign of the coming light of Christ. Advent means coming. We are preparing ourselves for the days when:

- nations shall beat their spears into pruning hooks and learn war no more,
- the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and a little child shall lead them,
- the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad and the desert shall rejoice and blossom,
- the Lord will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel (God is with us).

God of grace, your eternal word took flesh among us. Prepare our hearts for his coming again: keep us steadfast in hope and faithful in service that we may receive the dawn of his kingdom: through Jesus Christ, who lives in power with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Lighting of the Advent Candle
Third Sunday in Advent
The Book of Common Worship

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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FOR THE LOVE OF CHRISTMAS

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
December 19, 1999
Luke 2: 1-7
Matthew 22: 34-40

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart . . .You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22: 37,38)

Dear God, in these final days of hurried preparation, remind us of your presence and your love. In the middle of it all, startle us once again with the simplicity of the birth of your son, your word made flesh in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Among the more predictable things we Christians do at Christmas is lament the secularization of our holiday. It's almost obligatory to complain about the commercialization, the potent mix of religious sentiment, consumer economy and the longest bull market in history. Every preacher worth his or her salt has a sermon in the files that is a full-scale, all-out, homiletic artillery attack on how the culture has removed our Jesus from his own birthday celebration.

This year our worst fears about the secularization of Christmas and the removal of Christ from the celebration were realized, literally, when baby Jesus disappeared from his manger in Daley Center, right across the street from City Hall. It was big—the papers and television news gave it top priority, along with a picture of the official sign that was placed in the manger, announcing "Baby Jesus stolen, 12/5/99." That did it—the final act in the capture of our culture by the secular humanists—Baby Jesus stolen!

When he showed up a day or so later in a locker at Union Station, it reminded me of something Monty Python might have done, or J .D. Salinger written.

There was a lot of community breast beating and hand wringing, and lamenting our sinful, secular society, and I confess I had a vision of Jesus, in heaven, doubled over in laughter at the whole incident.

Because, as a matter of fact, his birth was about as secular as it could be. It didn't happen in a church or a temple. It happened in a barn. There wasn't anything traditionally religious about it; no chanting, preaching, no religious icons or artifacts—just the stable straw and a few farm animals. There wasn't a religious professional in sight and a good thing too, or he would probably have formed a committee, written a creed or a constitution to keep people like the shepherds, who were anything but respectable religious people, outside. The closest human being besides his mother and father was an innkeeper, a businessman, trying to deal with more guests than he could accommodate—hungry guests who wanted food and wine and in the middle of it all, a moment of

humanity and grace when he allows a late arriving couple, she very pregnant, to sleep out back in the barn. It is a very secular event.

We lament the secularization of our Christmas because it is so easy to do: some of what the culture does with it is so banal. In the admirable effort not to offend anyone's religious, or anti-religious sensibilities, we've weeded out every hint of religious significance and are left with not much more than elves and bright colors. A new record was set this year, I thought, by the parade on Michigan Avenue to celebrate the turning on of the lights. Now I do sympathize with the people who have to plan these events for a city that is amazingly diverse religiously. No matter what you do, somebody will be offended. So I really don't expect or want a float with the nativity scene on it. But I did wonder about what appeared to be an Aztec warrior swaying to the beat of drums in front of a smoking volcano. You don't have to have the angel chorus singing Handel's Messiah, but what was that about? And the monstrous Mickey and Minnie Mouse balloons frightening all the children and the skinny little Santa, gyrating and gesturing far too frenetically for the dignified, substantial, kindly old St. Nick of my childhood. I was watching all this from the steps of the church and when the Aztec warrior passed by, the man beside me, a Session member, said, "It warms your heart doesn't it—all this wonderful old tradition." Our lament, I recall, was interpreted by Bozo the clown, who at least I recognized, and by our choir which had valiantly struggled to maintain some semblance of the sacred by singing Christmas carols, suddenly—giving up—and launching an enthusiastic chant—Bozo! Bozo! Bozo!. It warmed my heart.

Vernon Broyles, a friend of mine, who directs Social Justice and Corporate Witness Ministries for the Presbyterian Church, wrote an essay on Christmas in which he said:

> "The message of Christmas is not about charity. It is not about feeling guilty for being comfortable. It is about change. It is about ordering our lives differently, whether anyone else does or not, so that we reflect in our own lifestyles and in our own choices the word of God who is incarnate in that sweet little Jesus boy." (*Presbyterian Today,* 12/98, p.42)

Christmas is about change. We celebrate it with customs that are old—sometimes centuries old—handed down from one generation to the next, but the message of Christmas is about transformation—corporate and personal.

One time, near the end of his life, the man the baby of Bethlehem became, was teaching in the Temple in Jerusalem. It was the last week of his life. The Pharisees, guardians of religious purity, keepers of the tradition, were trying to entrap him, trying to get him to say something so incriminating that the Roman authorities would intercede and eliminate him. They tried two topics that are always controversial—politics and sex: they asked about taxation and about divorce. And then, unwittingly, they gave him the opportunity to say what he wanted to say succinctly and dramatically and unforgettably. This is it. This is his "summa theologica," this is what his birth and life and death are about.

They asked: "Teacher, what is the greatest commandment?" Everyone knew the answer. It's right there at the beginning of the law, the Shema, they recited it every day. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind." But then he added

another sentence which was also in the scriptures, but by placing it here, in juxtaposition to the love of God, he forever changed the religious landscape. "A second is like it," he said. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and prophets."

They wanted a simple kernel of eternal truth, a clear, mandate that would forever assure them that they were doing the right thing, obeying God. And he made that project infinitely more complicated and demanding by bringing the neighbor into the equation—the one who needs you, not just the nice folk next door with whom you've been exchanging "good mornings" and "good evenings" for years, but the man lying in the ditch, the despised racial minority, the social and religious and moral outsider, the very one whose life style you find abhorrent. "Love your neighbor," he said. That's what this is all about—a new way of living in relationship with the world, in relationship with other people. Change—transformation—your conversion—that's what Christmas is about.

Some things never change much. Everybody knows what religion is really about. It's about living within the moral, ethical, behavioral boundaries set by your particular religious institution. And so religion has meant, at one time or another, not eating pork or shell fish, or meat on Friday; not planting the wrong kinds of grain in the same field, or mixing different kinds of threads in the same garment, not working on the Sabbath or going to movies on Sunday, not eating meat or smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol, not marrying, not divorcing, not remarrying, celibacy, chastity. Everyone knows what religion is about. Religion means believing the truth with such certainty that you can define it and nail it down and keep out those who don't agree with it, and at one time or another it has meant being persuaded that your truth is so important that you can force people to accept it for their own good; torture them into accepting it, kill them for not accepting it; launch crusades, declare war in the name of your truth, declare theological war on people of different truth definitions and faith commitments. Everyone knows what religion does to ideas like love—in the name of love religion declares theological war—it's called an evangelistic crusade, loving neighbors by telling them that their truth is inadequate.

Jesus stands in contrast to all of it. Christmas means change and I propose that what needs changing more than anything else is religion and its relentless refusal, in the name of its own purity and exclusivity, to hear him when he says, "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself." What a difference it would make in the world if Christian people would welcome the child by listening to what the man the child became, said about loving neighbors.

What a difference in this city next summer if 100,000 Southern Baptists came to town to express God's love for all; to live out the mandate of Jesus to love neighbor as self, instead of a crusade to turn Catholics and Jews, Muslims and Hindus and Presbyterians into Southern Baptists.

What a wonderful and faithful testimony to the Lordship of Jesus Christ it would be if the Southern Baptists did something none of the rest of us are big enough to do: send 100,000 people to our city to tutor and mentor 100,000 children and young people and adults;

befriend the children, play ball with the children, go to the zoo and the lake with the children, tell the children that someone loves them and cares about them.

God knows someone needs to do that. Love says "you matter, your welfare is important, your life has value." Go over to what's left of Cabrini Green and ask yourself—"What's the societal message this place conveys?" Forget about who's to blame for a minute and simply ask—"Do the little ones who live here—who walk through this filth, who live in this place—do they see or experience anything here that says they matter, they have value, they are cherished and loved?"

Christmas is about change. Love transforms religious institutions, societal structures—but first and foremost, love changes people. Love warms and softens hearts. Love opens us to new life, to new passion, to new commitment. Love transforms and converts. Love is a powerful change agent. Physicians know that love is good for your health. Doctor Bernie Siegel, a cancer specialist and professor at Yale Medical School observed that cancer patients sometimes, somehow come to the conclusion that they have a character defect and are no longer lovable. Siegel noted that when you feel unloved, you soon conclude that you are unlovable and then the capacity to love starts to wither. Part of the healing process, he teaches, is to reverse that sequence: to release the life giving power of love simply by letting patients know that they are loved. "Death is not the worst thing," Siegel wrote. "Life without love is." (*Love, Medicine and Miracle*, p. 207)

German theologian Helmut Thielicke put it beautifully. "All loving," he said, "is ultimately thanksgiving for the fact that we ourselves have been loved." (*The Waiting Father,* p.168)

That is how Christmas changes us by reminding us that we are loved. The birth of the baby, when we understand it as a gift that conveys God's unconditional love, says to you and me—you matter, you have value, your life is worth my love—when we know the birth as God's becoming vulnerable as a newborn infant in order to say 'I love you,' our transformation, our conversion, has begun.

There is power in that—power to give light in the midst of darkness, laughter in the midst of mourning, and sometimes life in the midst of death.

There was an article in the *New York Times* a while ago about a Polish Catholic priest that caught my eye. The picture showed Father Romuald-Jakub Weksler-Waszkenel walking through the remains of the Nazi Majdanek concentration camp where his mother was executed. Father Weksler-Waszkinel is a Jew and how he became a Catholic priest is a story about love—God's love—the same love that was born in Bethlehem.

He grew up in a good Polish Catholic family. His mother doted on him. He remembers one time being taunted by a couple of drunks who yelled "Jew-orphan" and wondering what it meant. He recalls staring in the mirror to find resemblances to his family He also remembers reading a school book about Jews in Poland to his mother and her eyes filling with tears. After high school he decided to become a priest and at ordination there was some question about his baptism. In 1968 he finally confronted his mother, Emilia: "Am I

a Jew?" he asked. Her answer was simply, "Don't I love you enough?" Even though it wasn't an answer, he knew.

And then 10 years later his mother was dying. He visited her in the hospital, kissed her hands and said, "The time has come to tell me." Emilia did not hesitate.

He was born in 1943 in a small town nearby. His father was shot in a ghetto uprising. His mother was trapped. Somehow she made contact, through a nun, with Emilia. They met. His mother begged Emilia to take her infant and save him from certain death. Emilia hesitated. But then the priest's Jewish mother said something decisive. "You are a devout Christian. You believe in Jesus Who was a Jew. So, save this Jewish baby for the Jew in whom you believe."

His mother and older brother, Samuel, age 4, were arrested, taken to Majdanek and killed.

Emilia told him: "You must love your mother for she was very wise. Those words she spoke were words that saved your life."

--Words about a little Jewish baby like the one who was born in a manger.

--Words about the mysterious love of God given to all humankind in that birth.

--Words about the inclusive, unconditional love of God that transcends religious categories and names and definitions—love for all God's children—Jew, Gentile, Christian, Muslim, Hindu—all God's children.

--Words about the man the baby became who one day forever changed the way we must think about religion and live religiously by saying:

> "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself."

The message of Christmas—for everyone—is about love: love for you and me, love that can transform and change and bring life out of death and laughter out of mourning, and light in every darkness, whatever that may be for you this morning.

--Words about the Word become flesh among us.

Hear that word. Give that love entrance to your heart; let it change you; let it bring you life and light and joy. And then, do what he said to do—love your neighbor—as yourself—for the love of Christmas.

Amen.